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Letter to Society

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LETTER TO SOCIETY

Maria Pomales

Dear Society,

Maria, here. I remember one of the very first statements you threw at me that really made me think about who I am.

“You’re either a mountain person or a beach person, Pomales.”

Mr. Fuccelli really made it sound so simple. Maybe it was for him. But for a Puerto Rican girl who was born and raised in rural West Virginia, this just wasn’t the case. See, I was most definitely both of those people, down to my very being, and still am to this day. Though I have yet to step foot on the island, I still feel a strong connection to it. Pride still wells up in me every time I see a Puerto Rican flag hanging from someone’s rearview mirror or stamped on the front of a ball-cap. I still have a sudden urge to sway my hips every time a strong salsa rhythm catches my attention. At the same time, I still consider sweet tea my go-to beverage and deer jerky my go-to snack. I still wipe away a few stray tears each Christmas Eve when I look around at the families gathered in my little white Brethren church off of route 220. I still resonate with a lot of different things. Conflicting as they may seem, they make me who I am.

I’ve spent the majority of my young adult life being ashamed of myself. Being ashamed of my two halves and feeling less whole because of it. I clearly remember being laughed at for wearing my uncle’s old camouflage sweatshirt. Not because it was oversized, but because the very concept of

8-year-old Maria blending in with the small-town culture and dressing like the rest of my mom's family just seemed ridiculous. Shannon even laughed at me. I know that's because you told her to.

I know you influenced Mariana and Delia too. I know you're the reason they called me a hillbilly and a hick every summer I came to visit. That is, until I learned how to change the way I talked when I was around them. Abuela liked it better that way too, but she wouldn't if it wasn't for you.

You made my classmates laugh when Coach Adams called me "Speedy Gonzalez" for the entirety of Freshman year gym class. I laughed along. I let my friends make jokes about me jumping the border or running from the police during track practice. I made fun of myself. I thought that's what I was supposed to do. That's what you told me, anyway.

My heart still hurts when Grandma retells the story of how her family didn't have enough money to buy her nice shoes and clothes, so she had to find work while her younger siblings went to the one-room schoolhouse. Or whenever she tells me how Granddaddy didn't graduate high school either because somebody had to stay home and take care of the farm. I can't help but cry when Dad tells me about how he and his naval buddies were treated when they came back from Vietnam. How they walked into that bar in Mississippi and walked right back out after the owner refused them service. Not because he was against the war, but because they were all brown or black men. My blood boils when I remember how Dad was laid off from his supervisor position at the local nursing home. Mr. Dunmore, the new administrator, only said that he'd rather go in a "different direction" with his supervising staff and there was no other reason for it. Dad got a pay cut and given an "office" in the shed outside. I'll never forget that day. I'm still so mad I could cry. Then the new supervisor, his new boss, proceeded to racially harass him for the next few months. Dad laughed along, but I begged him to stop. He said he didn't know what else to do.

All of that, thanks to you.

Now, I won't push anymore blame. I shouldn't expect any different from society. But maybe, just maybe, I could teach you a thing or two.

My Appalachian roots run deep, and that is something I can never run away from, not that I'd ever want to now. Yes, my first name has an accent mark over the "I," but I still have a little bit of a twang each time the words "right" or "fire" roll off my tongue. My grandparents might've not had the opportunity to graduate because of the economic situation they were in, but thanks to all of their hard work and sacrifice, I've been able to graduate with a dual degree from the largest university in the state. Granddaddy Mitchell didn't get to see it, but I know he'd be proud. One of my favorite places to spend my free time while I'm home is the old family farm he grew up on. That's where I took my best furry friend Carmy on her last walk, and rode in the back of Uncle Jr.'s truck to go get our Christmas tree last year. My favorite time of the year is Treasure Mountain Festival Weekend. The one time a year my little town actually has more people in it than livestock. You can hear bluegrass melodies carrying through the mountains that cradle Franklin in their warm embrace. The strumming of banjos always brings a smile to my face as I walk down main street. Nobody is ashamed or embarrassed. Quite the contrary, we all beam with pride.

Everything about my Appalachian pride is true, and, contrary to what I used to believe, that doesn't make me any less of a Latina. I love to make my arroz con gandules and tostones, just like my Abuela still does. I love to listen to 1970s salsa radio while I get ready in the mornings. I once had someone tell me it seemed like I was trying too hard to be Puerto Rican. I should've told them how ridiculous that statement was because I don't have to "try" to be Puerto Rican at all. I just am. And I'm so proud of that, even if I didn't used to be. My people have put up with so much discrimination, my own family included. Puerto Rico has given the world amazing things: Reggaeton, Barbeque, Hammocks, Rita Moreno, etc.

It took me a long time, a very long time, but I eventually realized that

Puerto Rican and Appalachian cultures really have a lot in common. They're both as friendly as can be. Try leaving a Mammaw's house or an Abuela's house without eating something, I dare you. They both have their own mountain people. In Puerto Rico they're called jiberos, but they're wild and wonderful all the same. Family farms are scattered all over the place. Walking around your property barefoot is not that uncommon. Fried chicken. They're both unapologetically stubborn, proud, and resilient. They both shaped me and molded me into the woman I am today.

And for that I am forever grateful.

So, society, take some notes. You think you know everything about everyone, but you don't really know them. Learn, experience, and appreciate all of the wonderful things that different people have to offer. The world will be a much better place.

Best wishes,

Maria Pomaes